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# Inauthentic authenticity: Semiotic design for globalization in the margins of China

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## 1 Point of departure

In an insightful ethnographic study of the francophone areas in Canada, Monica Heller (2003) observes that, as a result of the emerging heritage tourism, the previously stigmatized regional variety of French spoken there starts to acquire new economic value and social legitimacy because of its ring of authenticity. Heller argues that the commodification of language and identity (i.e. deploying the local French as either a desirable skill on the tourism-spawned labor market or a profitable cultural product in the translocal heritage business) engendered by the globalized new economy not only repositions Canadian French speakers as potentially privileged owners of bilingual resources with new economic opportunities, but also opens up room for them to negotiate what it means to be authentic locally in terms of both language status and cultural affiliation. As she demonstrates, the alternative meanings of authenticity and ways of producing it are caught in – and shaped by – complex tensions surrounding the issue of historical marginalization to do with 'ethnolinguistic minority' in Canada, that is, authenticity as stigmatized (francophone) identities and products presupposed by the State-orientated ideology of ethnonationalism and monolingualism (see also Heller 2006, 2011). Such tensions are brought upon mainly by the transition of the local economic structure and the consequent processes of cultural commodification in globalization, which redefines the roles of the language in relation to local identity claims while reorganizing the systems of producing, distributing and recognizing language resources and identity practices as authentic (i.e. 'orders of authenticity', cf. Wang 2012) on the local, the State, and other supra-local scale-levels (see Blommaert 2003 for a discussion). The outcome of this is the transformation of authenticity in its old sense, which, paradoxically, involves '(visibly) *inauthentic* processes of

standardization and commodification' (Heller 2003: 475, my emphasis) demanded by new market conditions.

Heller's study offers several points of inspiration for our investigation of authenticity in the context of China in this paper. First of all, it highlights the margins of society as an important site of authenticity (a term understood here primarily as identity effects emerging from specific semiotic practices that render the production, uptake, and consumption of these effects socially recognizable and legitimate). Margins are defined in relation to the centers and the center-periphery dynamics, as captured in e.g. Wallerstein's (2004) World-Systems theory in which global capitalism organizes the world into centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries according to their hierarchical but interconnected economic-political functions and power-relations. A sociolinguistic margin is often correlated to – and (re)produced through – such mechanism of economic, political and social structuration in which the meaning of authenticity attached to the margin is dominated by top-down modernist discourses, such as – prevalent to the nation-state – the labeling of ethnolinguistic minorities or nonnative speakers in relation to the standard(ized) normative use of language (e.g. Bonfiglio 2010; Silverstein 1996); such discourses effectively minorize and marginalize certain groups. In other words, what constitute margins and what makes their authenticity compelling and legitimate are both characterized by how they have been imagined and represented from the perspective of the centers and the dominant groups. Bauman and Briggs (2003), for instance, describe the long traditions of the politics of recognition as the undemocratic and unequal influences of 'voices of modernity' – hegemonic discourses that lead to authenticity through the power tactic of 'misrecognition' (cf. Bourdieu 1990). Such authenticity – often centered on binary terms of standard/nonstandard, pure/impure, superior/inferior, valid/invalid, real/fake, etc. – is socially construed, norm-governed, and systemically controlled, and so are the semiotic resources necessary for producing it (language, symbol, image, discourse, etc.) in terms of distribution, ownership, and value judgment (cf. Blommaert 2005). From this point of view, for the margins, authenticity is a serious matter of high social and symbolic stakes, and its

achievement necessarily revolves around the normative expectations of the centers and the structural inequality in power and normativity between the margins and the centers.

Yet, as Heller's study also shows, the current phase of globalization is – in very specific ways – beginning to change and reorder the (infra)structure of the center-periphery distinction and, as such, the discursive regime upon which the production and circulation of authenticity have largely been based (Coupland 2003a; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2013). Indeed, contemporary late-modern conditions effectuated by globalization – such as the emergence of the new economy, of new channels of communication powered by new technologies, of transnational movement, border crossing, and complex flows of people, objects, information, and ideas (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Bauman 1997; Castells 2000; Giddens 1990) – contribute to new, unpredictable and hybridized patterns of 'superdiversity' (cf. Vertovec 2007, 2010), thus challenging the 'robust and well-established orthodoxy' of language and identity rooted in modernist ideologies (Blommaert & Rampton 2011: 3).

Such processes have created unexpected identity potentials, especially for those in the margins (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes 2013), for how they access what semiotic resources, how they make use of them, for what purposes and effects can no longer be readily defined or confined by old notions and criteria of authenticity which, until recently, have been tied strictly to locality (e.g. physical proximity and norm-sharedness). The emerging domains where these shifting practices begin to occur, such as the francophone heritage tourism in Canada, have become globalizing 'zone[s] of transformation' (Heller 2003:473) – nevertheless, highly *niched* ones – in which the modernist order of authenticity is being contested and reconfigured by postmodern realities. Globalization has not made the world more uniformed or more equal, as Blommaert (2003, 2010) contends, but as far as the margins are concerned, it does present certain opportunities by creating sociolinguistic niches in which very specific semiotic opportunities that are only possible because of the local conditions of globalization and unavailable elsewhere appear. Such niches in turn require

strategic maneuvering with specialized semiotic resources, sometimes new or invented ones, in order to accomplish specific goals of authenticity (often to do with translocal mobility). Therefore, examining authenticity in the margins must engage with globalization, in particular, the niched (thus also restricted) opportunities afforded by globalization to the margins, as crucial sites of investigation.

This takes us to a third point: to situate authenticity in the above understanding within the paradigm of a 'sociolinguistics of globalization' proposed by Jan Blommaert (cf. 2003, 2010; also Coupland 2003b). Heller's attention to globalizing francophone minorities in Canada and a wide range of other related studies (Blommaert 2010; Blommaert et al. 2011; Collins et al. 2009; Coupland 2003c, 2010; Pennycook 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2012; etc.) form a growing body of scholarship in language and globalization. Taking stock of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and various interdisciplinary research on globalization, it has put in place a set of foundational building blocks for analyzing authenticity via semiotic acts of meaning and identity making in contemporary societies. The most basic understanding about language in globalization can perhaps be formulated, for the sake of this paper, in necessarily brief terms as the following: enabled by unprecedented translocal mobility, communicational events in globalization processes tend to take place simultaneously on multiple *scales* (the local, the national, the global, etc.), with each scale organizing its patterns of normativity differently around its distinctive center of authority; these multiple systems of norms are layered and hierarchically organized, forming *orders of indexicality*, and in this way, they are also *polycentric*, consisting of multiple, competing centers of norms about authenticity (cf. Blommaert 2005, 2010; Blommaert & Rampton 2011). These principles allow us to see authenticity (and all identity projects) as something emergent, multifaceted, extremely dynamic and always flexible rather than an essentialized, monolithic pre-given, something that evolves out of multi-scalar, polycentric social practices and complex processes of navigation and negotiation, i.e. 'authentication' (Bucholtz 2003). Building on this, Blommaert and Varis (2011 and this issue) have further developed a heuristics of authenticity in superdiversity. They posit that contemporary identities, such as being

a ‘chav’ or a ‘hajibista’, are about discursive orientations towards specific sets of emblematic resources arranged by a multitude of – never random, and sometimes conflicting – micro-hegemonized niches, for which individuals need to not only assemble resources in their repertoires accordingly, but also deploy them appropriately, that is, to know and to work with the benchmark or degrees of ‘enoughness’ at which a semiotic maneuvering can adequately compromise with the various judgment calls present in a particular situation in order to pass as authentic. This interpretation, particularly its emphasis on the strategic use of semiotic resources for the successful enregistering of authenticity, provides a useful way of analyzing the complex processes and effects of authenticity in globalization.

What this paper will explore is closely connected to the above points. It investigates the semiotic production and articulation of authenticity in the context of China and its deepening globalization processes by drawing on ethnographic observations of Enshi in Hubei Province, a remote ethnic minority area that is perceived as well as experienced as a geopolitical and sociocultural margin in China. It pays particular attention to two sociolinguistic niches emerging from Enshi’s recent integration into China’s economic reform, modernization and globalization: Internet hip-hop subculture, and ethnic heritage tourism. In each case, as we will soon see, authenticity is both a niched identity potential and a highly sensitizing issue in which a number of normative frameworks of recognition, ranging from the local to the global, enter the scene and are brought to bear by those who, out of necessity and desire, seek new meanings of authenticity and new ways of realizing it under new conditions. This leads to deliberate and strategic efforts in reassembling the local repertoire through manipulating and inventing specific semiotic resources, practices that are guided by the device of ‘semiotic design’ so as to satisfy old norms of authenticity while gaining new recognitions elsewhere as a way to acquire translocal mobility that is otherwise unavailable. The products of these practices, similar to Heller’s (2003) observation in Canada, appear to display ‘inauthentic authenticity’ which, in fact, reflects the very essence of the quest for authentic identities in our time rather than the collapse of authenticity. In order to see more clearly how such

processes of authenticity are played out, a discussion focusing on the notion of semiotic design in respect to authenticity will be provided in the next section, before moving onto the detailed empirical analysis of the two cases in Enshi. This is followed by a critical discussion on designing inauthentic authenticity as a feature and a strategy of identity making in the margins of globalization.

**2 Semiotic design and authenticity**

The theoretical drift of semiotic design pivotal to this paper derives mainly from the works of Gunther Kress (e.g. Hodge & Kress 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, 1996/2006; Kress 2010) in which he consistently argues for a social approach to semiotics as representational and communicational practices. The core thesis of Kress (and his colleagues) is to show that the semiotic representation of meaning making has a material and a social aspect – an alignment with the Hallidayan (1978) socially orientated semiotic theory in rejection of the Saussurean (1983) tradition in which the study of signs focused solely on their internal linguistic structures as autonomous units – both of which should be taken into account, as a twin focus, in order to sufficiently address the form, the meaning and the function of signs. The emphasis on the materiality of semiotics enables us to account for a sign by looking at its *compositional structures*, i.e. its physical features and formal attributes in its encoding, with depth and sophistication. A major framework developed for this is the notion of 'multimodality' (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, 1996/2006; Kress 2000a, 2010). It brings to attention different modes of representation: the visual, the aural and the gestural etc. as well as (sometimes even more salient than) the linguistic mode, all of which coexist in the same semiotic act, with each mode as a form of semiotic resource offering particular material and meaning possibilities – what is called *affordance*. By integrating various modes and their affordances, a coherent, i.e. orderly, also ordered semiotic ensemble is produced, according to culturally informed and context specific *principles of composition*. These principles rest on a complex web of factors in communication, for instance, the medium of interaction, the (modally constituted) resources available or possible, the site of display, the

genre that provides the social frame, and most importantly, the historically developed norms and conventions and the social and power relations on which the dialectics between the making and the reading of a semiotic object is predicated. In this sense, the materiality of semiotics is inherently social, embedded in the social processes of meaning making. This is the fundamental point in Kress's approach of Social Semiotics.

One of the central concerns in Kress's Social Semiotics is about design or choice-making in and for multimodal communication. As he explains, '… signs are always newly *made* in social interaction; signs are motivated, not *arbitrary* relations of meaning and form; the motivated relation of a *form* and a *meaning* is based on and arises out of the *interest* of makers of signs; the forms/signifiers which are used in the making of signs are *made* in social interaction and become part of the semiotic resources of a culture' (Kress 2010: 54-55, original emphases). These assumptions shift our focus from semiotics as product to semiotics as practice and – as Kress (2010: 6) holds – from the semiotics of *competence* (focusing on the stability of social regulation) to that of *design* (focusing on the dynamics in human agency). It indicates that what makes Social Semiotics 'social' has much to do with how sign-makers actively participate in and shape the social and semiotic world through prospective 'design thinking' and 'production thinking' in fusing form and meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001), in other words, selecting semiotic forms of representation, e.g. mode and medium, in such a way that they can in the best fit way or – in Kress's term – 'aptly' express the meanings that the makers of signs have wished to make. Thus, signs are not abstract or disinterested, but are charged with the motivations and intentions of their designers. They are better understood as social messages encoded in a specifically *designed* semiotic shape that provides optimal affordances and potentials in correspondence with the meaning they are intended to convey, and their meaning is (at least partly) reflected in the design of their form. It is in this way that we see the dual aspect of materiality and sociality of semiotics Kress advocates.

This, however, is not to say that semiotic design is entirely left to the interest of the designer as free will. As Kress reminds us, semiotic design has its own grammar: 'the implicit and explicit knowledge and practices around the resources, consisting of the elements and rules underlying a culture-specific form of visual communication' (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996/2006: 3). Because the designer is a *social(lized)* being, his/her interest of design is also socially produced, motivated by his/her awareness and knowledge of all aspects of the social environment in which he/she is located and in which the intended actions and interactions surrounding the designed product take place. These include the social organization of the participants (as well as the immediate conditions of communication) that to a great extent determines which particular configuration of resources is plausible (or otherwise). Kress takes, for instance, sign-reading as a crucial dimension of design in which the recognition and assessment of representation and communication based on the 'participatory relations' play a vital role in how semiotic resources are deployed. According to him, '[t]he sign … reflects the interests of its designer as much as the designer's imagined sense of those who will see and read the sign. The sign is based on a specific rhetorical purpose, an intent to persuade with all means possible those who pass by and notice it' (Kress 2004: 111). That is to say, how signs are or *can be* semiotically realized is notably driven by how they will be received and interpreted. The 'reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee' (Bakhtin 1984a: 86) shapes and conditions the communication patterns between the sign-maker and the sign-reader and, as such, semiotic design. Such relationship is necessarily a social one, anchored in the hierarchically organized power structure and ideological influences that produces norms, authority and unequal positions in which the question of design is always subject to and refereed by those who have more control over evaluation and judgment on meaning making. This is a basic part of the grammar of design.

But Kress's conceptualization of design is more than – as mentioned earlier – competence in norm conforming and reproduction. He asserts that design is an agentive, forward-looking act, 'a means of projecting an individual's interest into

their world with the intent of effect in the future' (Kress 2010: 23). Put it differently, design involves deliberate semiotic maneuverings made from a proleptic [1] perspective, as both a (retrospective) response to certain social conditions and a (prospective) modification and innovation that aim to make changes and transformations. Kress believes that creativity and innovation happen in all representational and communicational practices, however banal or mundane, because each instance of individual(ized) use of a semiotic resource is framed differently, with different intentions and effects, thus, is a process of transformation and remaking, and of new knowledge creation and learning. Hence, sign-makers are seen not just 'as users of norms or systems of stable practices, but as constant transformers of these' (Kress 2002:19; also Kress 2000b). Their proleptic perspective is founded upon the historically developed understanding of society, but it already puts them in a position of anticipation in which their semiotic use consistently orients towards new possibilities of remaking and transforming meaning through forms by design and, in doing so, transforming social relations and subjectivity. From this perspective, semiotic design can be seen as a strategic social action that deals with inequality through creative rearrangement and transformation of resources as 'symbolic power' (cf. Bourdieu 1991) in communication. It then opens up spaces for individuals to symbolically rework their identities.

Although Kress's social-semiotic theory of design has been applied mostly to literacy studies and formal learning, its take on design as both a semiotic process in terms of multimodality and a social process in which power relations are semiotically transformed can be fruitfully incorporated into our consideration of the issue authenticity in this paper. The converging points are quite clear: social identities rest, on the one hand, on the existing norms and structural factors of production and recognition in relation to power, and on the other hand, on the semiotically mediated agentive practices that constantly contest, negotiate and transform identity relations. With this shared dialectical principle, semiotic design can be

[1] I am grateful to Jan Blommaert for drawing my attention to this concept.

regarded as a useful sociolinguistic toolkit for observing and analyzing authenticity as practices of semiotization through its symbolic semiotic manifestations. The emphasis on human agency and proleptic orientation in design is particularly beneficial for addressing the semiotic deliberations and strategies as 'tactics' of authentication and intersubjectivity (cf. Bucholtz 2003) in pursuing authenticity – an increasingly complex, fragmented and ambivalent thing in globalization (this, as we will see next, is the main theme in the case of Enshi). In fact, it is through semiotic design individuals conceptually, ideologically and practically engage in their perpetual search for authenticity, an ongoing project that belongs to Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self. Let me make this point clearer by referring to Kress (2010: 23, original emphases) again: '… *design* is an assertion of the individual's interest in participating appropriately in the social and communicational world; and an insistence on their capacity to shape their interests through the *design* of messages with the resources available to them in specific situations'. These are the main motifs through which authenticity is understood and achieved. With these in mind, we are now ready to discuss the stories from Enshi in a globalizing China.

## 3 Designing for authenticity in Enshi

Enshi is officially known as Enshi Tujia and Miao[2] Autonomous Prefecture. Founded in


Figure 1: A map of Enshi in China (adapted from Zhu et al. 2008)

1983, it is the most recent established minority autonomous prefecture in China. Enshi is located in the southwestern corner of Hubei Province in Central China (see Figure 1), with a land area of about 24,000 square kilometers, mostly inaccessible rural mountains with low agricultural productivity, and a population of over 3.9 million: approximately 45% of Han (the Chinese Majority), 46% of Tujia (the local indigenous group), 6% of Miao and just 3% of twenty-six other smaller minority groups, based on China's 2010 population census. Due to its geographical complexities, Enshi has long suffered from physical isolation and historical detachment from the nearby regions and the centers of China. Its political economy was traditionally predominated by the feudalist petty peasant livelihoods which, as

[2] Tujia and Miao are two of China's fifty-six officially categorized ethnic groups. The largest group is Han, constituting more than 90% of China's total population. The other fifty-five groups are minorities or, as known in China, nationalities.

recorded in Jerome Ch'en's (1995) account of life of 'the highlanders' in this part of the world at the turn of the twentieth century, was further devastated by the fall of the late imperial and subsequent wars in the country. After the founding of the People's Republic, Enshi remained as a geopolitical margin of China. In 1986, three years after receiving its long-awaited minority status, it was identified by the central government's poverty reduction programme as one of the poorest rural areas in need of financial subsidies and policy support. Until today, Enshi is still labeled as a typically *lao* (old – referring to those extremely impoverished areas that served as revolutionary bases during the war years), *shao* (ethnic minority), *bian* (frontier or peripheral), *shan* (mountain-locked), and *qiong* (poverty-stricken) area in China's public and official discourses.

Figure 2: An image of Enshi by Xinhua[3], China's top official news agency

Such qualifications constitute a powerful modernist order of authenticity in which Enshi is positioned: a 'mythic' (cf. Barthes 2000) place that is eternally primordial, minority, traditional, local, poor, distant, marginal, and so forth (see Figure 2). This imagery operates as a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1991) that has serious sociolinguistic repercussions. Not only the local *fangyan* (dialect in contrast with the normative Chinese *Putonghua,* cf. Wang 2012), but all other aspects of local

[3] www.hb.xinhuanet.com/2007zfwq/2007-10/19/content_11448240.htm

identities fall within this framework of how Enshi and, by extension, people of Enshi are perceived – from the perspective of the centers, at the nation-state scale-level. For example, Tujia – even though it is only one of the twenty-nine groups that inhabit Enshi, and only 1% more than the local Han Majority – has become a synonym of Enshi, and the word *tu* (earth) is often selected for its extended meaning of 'backward, countrified, unrefined' as the abbreviation of Tujia and, therefore, Enshi. Such discourses of stigmatization of Enshi are easily found in everyday life in China. They are deeply enregistered as the 'authentic' Enshi identity.

More recently, Enshi has been gradually integrated into the national scheme of economic reform and development as China's processes of globalization deepen. In 2000, the area was absorbed into the country's Great Western Development Plan[4] and, consequently, found itself confronted with unprecedented opportunities and new challenges. Most of these opportunities are economic ones, in the form of influxes of investments, trade and business, but also infrastructures, such as transport systems and the Internet. Amidst the nationwide overwhelming energies in pursuing modernization and globalization, people in Enshi are becoming more conscious than ever that, with such opportunities come increasing possibilities of repositioning themselves and gaining mobility by breaking out of the confinement of locality, economically as well as socially, physically as well as symbolically. The cases I will present below are two such examples: one of Internet hip-hop subculture, and one of ethnic heritage tourism. Each case represents a particular sociolinguistic niche newly created during Enshi's globalization in which the established authenticity is called into question, and new meanings of authenticity and new ways of expressing it are specifically *designed* to fit the new conditions. This, as will become clear below, involves challenging and complex processes.

[4] In early 2000, China's central government initiated and launched the Great Western Development Plan to further its internal economic reform and modernization and, in particular, as a strategy to address the increasing regional imbalance between the affluent eastern coastal areas (e.g. Shanghai and Shenzhen) and the underdeveloped western inlands (e.g. Tibet and Inner Mongolia). Later that year, adjustments were made so that places such as Enshi were added to the Plan. The Great Western Development Plan envisions a 50-year scheme over three phases. It is by far the largest and the most invested government plan with the most profound changes to China so far.

### 3.1 An unqualified Enshi rapper

Let us begin with the story of a local individual, a self-branded 'unqualified' dialect rapper in Enshi. Like in cities and urban centers of China, with globalization and the recent availability of the Internet, local youth in rural places like Enshi also have a chance to participate in global transcultural flows such as hip-hop, producing their own voices through this form of music and verbal art, and reaching out online to audiences in disparate locales at low or no cost. A pioneer of this emerging Internet hip-hop subculture in Enshi is a rapper called Zeng Kun, a young man who embraces the new semiotic opportunity provided by the digital technology combined with the global flows of hip-hop ideology of 'keepin' it real' (cf. Pennycook 2007a, 2007b) for reconstructing authenticity in his personal identity, but also in the more general sense of locality, for which he has become somewhat a grassroots celebrity among young people in the local community. We can see this work of authenticity in the following excerpt from one of his rap songs entitled 'I am not a qualified dialect rapper' which he published online[5].

| | |
|---|---|
| 我不是一个称职的方言 raper | I'm not a qualified dialect rapper (line1) |
| 我只是，把看到的东西全部编成 rap | I just take what I see to compose rap (line2) |
| 一个沉迷颓废节奏的超级纯正哈 ber | Someone addicted to decadent rhythms, a super pure fool (line3) |
| 更不是你们想象中拥有 superpower | Neither am I like what you imagine with superpower (line4) |
| | |
| 我不是一个称职的恩施方言 raper | I'm not a qualified Enshi dialect rapper (line5) |
| 我只是，用节奏和文字乱喊的小娃 er | I just scat in rhythms and words like a small kid (line6) |
| 一个陶醉自我音乐的超级纯正哈 ber | Someone revels in their own music, a super pure fool (line7) |
| 完全不需要听众给我竖起指姆 er | No need at all for the audiences to give me the thumbs-up (line8) |

At the first glance, this may not look like language use of any extra-ordinariness, mainly written in Standard Chinese with odd instances of what appears to be English or attempts in English attached to each line, therefore broken, impure and

[5] http://yyfc.iq123.com/play.aspx?reg_id=1927818&song_id=3468151, my translation.

inauthentic for some. But I would argue the contrary: this is a small but typical example of the rapper's ingenious work of semiotic design. It not only raises explicitly the question of being 'qualified' (or not), i.e. of authenticity, at the meta-cultural level, but also answers this question by way of semiotic design: the rapper deploys the resources he has in his repertoire in such a way that they, against all social and linguistic odds and constraints, maximally and aptly attend to the expectations of authenticity on multiple scales, thus, showing that he is exactly the opposite of his self-mock for being unqualified and inauthentic. Therefore, the patchwork we see above is not a random scramble of signs; it is put in a *specific* shape motivated by what the rapper believes to be authentic and an authentic way to express it. In order to see how this works, we must examine closely the semiotic features observable in the lyrics. But before that, we need to first grasp some understanding about the complexity in the orders of authenticity surrounding the rapper and how this may impact on his processes of semiotization and authentication.

A first order of authenticity here is to do with the cultural format of hip-hop as 'a multimodal (or better: transmodal) semiotics of music, lyrics, movements and dress that articulates political and sub-cultural anti-hegemonic rebellion as well as aesthetics, a philosophy of life and a particular range of identities' (Blommaert 2010: 19). The global spread of hip-hop, as Pennycook (2007b: 103) argues, is in fact 'the global spread of authenticity' in which 'a tension between on the one hand the spread of cultural dictate to adhere to certain principles of what it means to be authentic, and on the other hand, a process of localization that makes such an expression of staying true to oneself dependent on local contexts, languages, cultures, and understandings of the real'. This means that to be authentic in hip-hop terms, one has to incorporate elements that are valid and recognizable on the global scale-level, such as the music genre, the fashion style and, frequently, the use of (African American) English, as well as those on the local scale-level, often the use of local language varieties and local themes of stories and people. These aspects are blended together to form a multimodal, hybridized semiotic ensemble – such is the

global hip-hop ideology of authenticity, and it provides the overall blueprint of semiotization of authenticity here. This leads to two sets of issues faced by the Enshi rapper: how authenticity is understood in his local context, and what semiotic resources he has in order to articulate authenticity on his own terms but still can be recognized by both local and nonlocal audiences.

The local context in which the rapper is situated is a multilayered and polycentric thing that is characterized by marginality in multiple senses of the word (see Wang 2012 for a fuller discussion). We have already seen this in the locality of Enshi as a deep margin of China in the earlier discussion. The same can be said about our rapper Zeng Kun as a heavily marginalized individual in Chinese society: a school dropout, an ex-offender, and consequently an unemployed idler and a stigmatized individual who is severely stuck in the low end of a 'backward' place. So, for Zeng Kun, Internet hip-hop is a real niche and a rare opportunity to break out of these social and physical confinements, to struggle against social marginalization and stigmatization, and to have his own voice heard (see Figure 3). Doing this in the virtual environment where the audiences are invisible and potentially nonlocal requires him to carefully design his semiotic use. It takes proleptic thinking to ensure his act of semiotization can be maximally noticed, understood and acknowledged, namely, authenticated. Here, then, comes into play the issue of language.

Figure 3: Internet hip-hop as a niche for Zeng Kun in Enshi (©Xuan Wang)

The issue of language is twofold, to do with the politics of language in China on the one hand, and on the other hand, the rapper's repertoire. China is a society with immense linguistic and cultural diversity, but China is also a nation-state that upholds the 'monoglot ideology' (cf. Silverstein 1996) in which the superiority of *Putonghua* is institutionally supported and widely enregistered (Dong 2010). By contrast, English as a foreign language is controlled and excluded by formal policies, while *fangyan* is often stigmatized and endangered, especially smaller ones (such as Enshi *fangyan*) which are 'underdeveloped' with limited sociolinguistic functions and no orthographic form (cf. Chen 1996; see Wang 2012). This of course have implications on what counts as semiotic authenticity in terms of language use in Chinese society, which has to be taken into account in our rapper's hip-hop design. Related to this, and shaped by this, is the structure of his language repertoire. He mainly speaks Enshi *fangyan*, notably the deep local vernacular in his native town. He also has a reasonable mastery of Standard Chinese in writing and orally in *Putonghua*. But he has little access to English. The few words he knows were, apart from distant memories of unfinished schooling, mainly picked up from foreign films and music circulated online. This highly truncated repertoire poses extra difficulties to his semiotization of hip-hop for wide audiences.

In the light of these conditions, we can now return to the excerpt shown earlier and see how different aspects of authenticity are enacted and transformed by Zeng Kun through his semiotic design. A number of maneuverings are happening at once here, and to dissect them, the concept of multimodality is indispensable. As soon as we apply it, we will find that our first impression of the language use that we 'see' is inaccurate.

Although visually we might say that the rapper adopts the script and the (literary poetic) register of Standard Chinese, in the aural mode, he actually uses distinct acoustic features of Enshi *fangyan*. Because of the primacy of aural experience in music, these acoustic features mark the rap song as an Enshi dialect song. They are used to flag up defining features of locality – an orientation towards the local

audiences, also a crucial strategy for constructing hip-hop authenticity in a global environment as well as the rapper's sense of self. At the same time, they are blended with the visual/written and stylistic features of the standard variety, which means that the lyrics can also be understood by nonlocals and nonspeakers of Enshi dialect in the visual mode via the interface of a computer. This design can be seen as a gesture towards the kind of authenticity Standard Chinese represents in terms of language ideology at the nation-state scale-level. It is also a practical choice due to the lack of orthography as a linguistic handicap of 'underdevelopment' *fangyan* has in the written mode, the mode that is demanded in digital communication. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the superimposition of dialectal acoustic features onto the literary poetic style of the lyrics that only Standard Chinese can be used for, signals a rejection of the monoglot standard and, therefore, a reassertion of the rapper's local affiliation.

This is added with the non-Chinese-looking bits of signs written alphabetically at the end of each line. Again, these consist of two types of designs. Those in Lines 1, 2 and 5 are lexical items taken from English, albeit heavily *localized* versions of the words 'rap', 'rapper' and 'superpower'. Their localization appears either as a visible misspelling, i.e. 'raper' instead of 'rapper', or as aural features of local accents, i.e. 'raapu' instead of 'rap', and 'superpouer' instead of 'superpower'. The choice of semiotic code of English and of the specific English words made here – 'rap', 'rapper' and 'superpower' – are clearly maneuverings emblematic of hip-hop as a global culture, therefore, indexing (hip-hop) authenticity on the global scale-level while speaking to audiences on that scale-level. Yet, the use of English seems bare minimum in the lyrics, and what is there is deviant in one way or another. To some extent, this can be explained by the rapper's repertoire, the fact that his knowledge of English is extremely limited, so he is using *all that he can* from his repertoire – this suggests evidence of 'aptness' in design. In fact, it is his *linguistic* knowledge of English that is limited; he has a good *sociolinguistic* knowledge of English and its indexical values, and he applies it appropriately in his hip-hop semiotization. However, the rapper's use of English can also be seen as the articulation of another

kind of authenticity, one that is affiliated to his locality, as its rendering of features of local 'accents' indicates a process of not only reproduction, but also *appropriation* of English that orients towards the local scale-level. The three words are only English to nonspeakers of Chinese. For Chinese speakers, especially Enshi *fangyan* speakers, they have been reembedded and resemiotized in the local micro-linguistic and macro-social contexts, which causes changes in their sound, spelling and function, thus, they are better understood as Chinese, even Enshi *fangyan* in this case, rather than English. In this sense, the rapper's use of English constitutes, echoing Kress, a semiotic transformation.

Finally, let us turn to the English-looking items 'er' and 'ber' the rapper has put at the end of Lines 3, 6, 7 and 8. Even though they may 'look' like lexemes from English, these items have little to do with English. Their meaning and function only become clear when we *listen* to the lyrics: they are actually attached to the Chinese units immediately preceding, as part of the words '哈ber' (idiot), '小娃er' (child) and '指姆er' (thumb). These are all words specific of the deep local vernacular of the rapper's hometown. Just like 'rap', 'raper' and 'superpower' are (English) in contrast with the rest of the (Chinese) sentence they are in, these vernacular *fangyan* words form a contrast with the rest of the sentence they are in which uses formal literary poetic Chinese. The rapper uses alphabetical script for encoding the particular dialectal feature of 'er' in each word for two purposes. He is unsatisfied with the writing of these words in the standard script of Chinese[6], which would look like 哈巴儿，小娃儿 and 指姆儿 and cannot capture the acoustic feature of syllabic integration of 'er' in them, as can be seen in 'ber'. But he again knows that the lack of orthography of *fangyan* makes these features difficult to represent. Hence he opts for the alphabetical system. This choice is out of interest and necessity as much as aesthetics, for by adopting alphabetical letters in the *fangyan* words, the rapper also creates a poetic pattern visually (as well as acoustically and stylistically). One may

[6] This insight was obtained through interviews with the rapper in Enshi in December 2009.

suggest that this strategy of his simultaneously caters for audiences on the local (i.e. *fangyan*), the national (i.e. orthography) and the global (i.e. alphabet) scale-levels, thus gives himself maximal potential to be heard and recognized.

Practices of semiotic design are evident and vigorous in the work of the Enshi rapper shown here, who, in every possible way, makes certain proleptic orientations towards multiple audiences and centers, i.e. sign-readers, on different scale-levels as well as the kind of expectations they may have of authenticity. The Internet provides a convenient platform of communicating and performing it from his locality, and global hip-hop culture a perfect semiotic genre. The outcome of the design may look messy and inauthentic, but only if we insist on a particular order of authenticity. If we understand communication as multi-scalar and polycentric phenomena in globalization, we will accept that it in fact involves clever and meticulous design and craftsmanship that make use of the semiotic resources the rapper has in his repertoire, while using them aptly and appropriately so that the potential uptake and recognition of their effects are maximized. This appropriateness is not simply about meeting the normative expectations – as we have seen – it entails a distinct 'carnivalesque' (cf. Bakhtin 1984b) aspect in which the rapper strategically deploys semiotics to subvert and 'counter-authenticate' all the hegemonic assumptions about authenticity that are relevant to his language use as well as his social positioning. The intensive shifts he makes in choosing semiotic features and ideologies of authenticity in multiple modes and on multiple scales produce a 'heteroglossic' voice through which inauthentic-looking authenticity is articulated and transformed.

### 3.2 An authentic Tujia costume

Above we have seen a case of semiotic design in Enshi as an individual endeavor for authenticity through Internet hip-hop subculture. We have seen in particular how this is semiotically played out at a micro-linguistic level. We are now moving onto our second case, at a macro-institutional level, in which authenticity centers on the

issue of the semiotic representation of *minzu* (nationality) or ethnicity that emerges from Enshi's new heritage tourism economy.

Although heritage tourism, especially ethnic heritage tourism, has been a global phenomenon for a long time in many parts of the world, it only became an economic opportunity for Enshi very recently, as a knock-on effect of China's economic reform policy of 1979. Tourism in Enshi began in the late 1980s, after its reintegration and recognition as a minority region, when its little-known natural scenery of deep mountains and local culture ere politically reframed and economically repackaged, turning suddenly from an image of wilderness, primitive and underdevelopment into one of rare beauty, ecological privilege and nostalgic pre-modern rural living. This indicates a symbolic shift in the order of authenticity that has historically stigmatized Enshi. But the impact of this stayed limited for a long time, partly due to the severe lack of local transport infrastructures and tourist facilities[7], and partly, the market competition from other parts of the country – especially the nearby southwestern minority regions – who are perceived to have much stronger cultural characteristics, therefore, more touristically 'authentic' and more appealing to the market. This latter point becomes a call for authenticity in terms of cultural *uniqueness* demanded by the tourist market which, for Enshi, has particularly to do with the features of its ethnic 'minoritiness' and how such features can be made recognizable and marketable through appropriate semiotic representation.

[7] Transportation has been a historical obstacle for Enshi in view of its geographical complexities and remoteness. Prior to the construction of a small local airport in 1993 that linked Enshi by low-capacity flight service with Wuhan (the capital city of Hubei Province), the only means of transport to Enshi was bus. The journey through mountains by bus was dangerous and long: it normally took more than twenty hours to get to Wuhan and casualties were commonplace due to treacherous road and weather conditions. Direct airline service to Beijing and other major cities was opened in 2009, using much larger aircrafts. In 2011, Enshi was connected to the national arteries of highway and railway. There is still a short of tourist facilities in Enshi. For example, the Director of Tourism Bureau of Enshi City revealed in an interview that the capacity of restaurants, shops and, particularly, hotels in Enshi are much below the market demand. He estimated that Enshi still needs at least another five thousand hotels.

Since joining the national Great Western Development Plan in 2000, the need for Enshi to reorganize its economic structure and to place its budding tourist industry in a strategic position has become even greater. In 2006, Enshi was also endorsed by its provincial government into the eco-cultural tourism development zone based in the local mountainous regions in which Enshi is encouraged to regenerate and enhance, among a number of other potentials, its '*minzu* cultural characteristics', that is, the local ethnic minority uniqueness. All these have reopened the old question of how to 'play the *minzu* card' – first raised by the prefectural government in the 90s – as a core strategy for Enshi's tourism and overall economic development. It has prompted a new wave of institutional discourses and actions on 'strengthening the cultural foundations' and 'combining *minzu* culture and tourism' for branding and marketing Enshi as an ethnic minority area. Much of this wave revolves around the semiotic representation of the Tujia, the local indigenous group that embodies Enshi, and, in particular, the designing of a set of 'authentic' Tujia ethnic clothing that can increase the market visibility and cultural authenticity of Enshi. A series of activities to promote awareness of and to actually design Tujia clothing have been coordinated by the local communities and supported by the prefectural government. For instance, the 20$^{th}$ anniversary of Enshi Prefecture in 2003 was used as a special occasion on which the elegance and distinction of Tujia clothing was emphasized and showcased to the media. In 2006, the Fashion Design deparment of Enshi Vocational and Technological Institute organized a special event inviting designs of the perfect Tujia clothing. Following that, in 2010 and 2011, a new and larger-scale design competition was again led by the prefectural government, involving forums and consultations by local scholars, community leaders and the media (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Designing authentic Tujia clothing in Enshi (©Xuan Wang)

What we have here is a salient example of semiotic design generated by processes of globalization. It is stimulated by the local uptake of heritage tourism as part of the global new economy, in which designing ethnic clothing was motivated by the commodification of the semiotic representation of the Tujia. This seems to be a widely observed phenomenon in heritage tourism across cultures and geographies, which has been critiqued for its 'staged authenticity' (cf. MacCannell 1973) in which the assumed original meaning and representation of cultural practices that belong to a certain ethnic group are distorted and repackaged for 'sale', i.e. for satisfying the kind of authenticity demanded by the tourists who seek to experience the Other and their differences. Indeed, the semiotic design in Enshi's tourist industry is astonishingly widespread: in addition to the Tujia clothing, design also is happening to the local ethnic dance, architecture, food, rituals[8], and the entire city layout of its capital – even the airplanes that travel frequently between Enshi and the major cities in China are specially designed by the prefectural government as a 'flying business card' with the crafts named after Enshi and painted with images of Tujia people

[8] Two examples: Enshi has designed a Chinese Valentine's Day as an annual themed tourist event based on the Tujia ritual of wedding laments; the sacrifice ritual performed at China's first Tujia Baishou Dance Festival in Enshi, 2009, was partly designed by one of its local organizers (this information came from a personal talk with the organizer, Mr Lang Hongbo, the Headman of Baifusi Town in Enshi's Laifeng County).

dancing in their colorful ethnic clothing – all of which are clearly driven by the market potential of tourism.

However, the semiotic design in Enshi, especially of the Tujia ethnic clothing, cannot be seen simply as something inspired by the global authenticity for heritage tourism alone. It is deeply connected to another more heartfelt question of authenticity to do with the local ethnic identity of Tujia, namely, the recognition of the minority status of Tujia in Enshi. This is a highly complex issue that involves Enshi's local history of identity formation and China's state ethnopolitics and ideology of multiculturalism, both of which the articulation of authenticity in the current resemiotization of the Tujia clothing has to take into account. In the scope of this paper, these aspects are necessarily kept brief as the following.

The establishment of Enshi's minority status through its ethnic population of Tujia was a convoluted story with certain discomfort. In the process of nation building after 1949, the Chinese government implemented ethnic classification in order to give recognition to minority groups and to integrate them into a 'unified, multinational country'. A large number of the fifty-five minority groups we now know in China, such as Ughur in the north and Zhuang in the south, were officially identified in the 50s. Each ethnic group, called *minzu*, (supposedly) has its own territory, common history, unique language, culture and tradition. However, as Thomas Mullaney (2011) shows in his account of this part of the Chinese history, the ethnotaxonomy of classification applied at the time had its epistemological, ontological and methological foundations largely rooted in the Western modernist social scientific beliefs in disciplines such linguistics and ethnology. It was unable to clearly define all ethnic groups according to pregiven, fixed categories such as language or specific cultural traits. Tujia was not properly recognized until 1957 because the group had been mixing and living together with other groups and they lacked the obvious cultural features that make them visibly different from the other groups. Its classification was prompted accidentally when a minority representative of Miao from a town bordering Hunan and Hubei provinces pleaded with the central

government to ‘reclassify’ her and her people in Hunan as Tujia – since Tujia and Miao spoke different languages – when she was invited to Beijing to attend the National Day Ceremony.

However, whereas areas in Western Hunan were officially recognized in 1957 as Tujia terroteries based on the locals’ self identification and years of extensive fiedwork by Chinese ethnologists in those areas, their adjacent neighbours in Enshi in Western Hubei did not receive the same recognition. The ethnic classification was soon brought to a long halt with the change of political climate in China when claiming any identity of difference would risk of being splitism and counter-revoluntionary. It was not until after the Cultural Revolution, the ethnic classification was resumed to address some of the issues left over from two decades ago. It was then Enshi’s case reopened.

Melissa Brown (2001, 2002) records that when the Enshi government started Tujia status reclassification and restoration in early 1980s, many of the local people were unwilling to ‘become’ Tujia since they ‘did not have Tujia consciousness’ (Brown 2002: 375) and preferred to consider themselves Han. She argues that the categories of ethnic boundary and distinction created by the local government – mainly by genealogical information and history of residence – did not reflect the actual cultural practice and socio-political experience of the individuals; it was a ‘manipulation’ of population statistics abidying by the state group identification criteria based on an arficial dichotonmy between Tujia and Han, a tactic of authentication by the local government that is ‘both economically beneficial and politically safe’ for the local populace as a whole (Brown 2002: 389). The disjuncture between the state recognition and the local sense of self observed here illustrates the sensitivity and power dyanmics of authenticity in relation to ethnic identity in China – particularly so for Enshi – in which the influence of the state prevails. It also shows how traditions that are often taken for granted are always the product of social invention (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and how authenticity is always emergent from negotiations and power strategies.

Within such a historical context, we begin to understand the possible anxiety about authenticity Enshi feels about its own ethnic identity and cultural heritage, and its need for a legitimate semiotic representation of these, such as authentic ethnic clothing, that is all the more important, especially in the eyes of the state. This, then, leads us to a further complication: the particular order of authenticity about the semiotization of ethnicity imposed by the state ethnopolitics and ideology of multicultualism and its representation.


Figure 5: Fifty-six *minzu* in China by Xinhua[9]

China's self-imagination as a unified, multiethnic nation is projected through an image of fifty-six (Han the Majority and fifty-five minority groups) equally positioned but uniquely different *minzu* (see Figure 5). The visible uniqueness in semiotic representation, i.e. ethnic clothing, is particularly important, for it is through the ominpresent displays of the juxtaposition of technicolored 'traditional' clothing that the state multiculturalism, diversity and unity are constructed and expressed. The (over)emphasis on the colorfulness and distinctness of each ethnic group is based on the standardized ethnotaxonomy orthodoxy in which dress, much like language or

[9] http://news.xinhuanet.com/photo/2005-09/17/content_3501742.htm

customs, becomes a *categorical* feature of ethnicity that is taken as the crystallization of the group's entire cultural heritage, therefore, authenticity. On the other hand, this emphasis speaks for a view of ethnic minority from the perspective of Han, a view that presupposes authenticity in terms of *minzu* as pre-existing, primordial and historical truths, as peripheral minorities – the 'nobel savage' – which, in Gladney's (1994: 94) views, is a project of nationalization and modernization that promotes 'the homogenizaion of the majority at the expense of the exoticization of the minority'. According to him, this kind of ideology operates through the display and commodification of the minority other in China, such as state-sponsored media and tourism. Thus, we see that the state politics of representation works as a powerful ideology of authenticity in which the semiotization of ethnic clothing is framed.

In the case of Enshi's Tujia, the local desire for authenticity through designing ethnic clothing has to be understood in relation to the complex orders of authenticity outlined above. What is noteworthy in this case is the strong emphasis on and concerted effort in semiotic design as a consensus of the local people led by the local government. This, as we have seen, is inevitably conditioned by the global economy and the state multiculturalism, both of which demand the supply of a certain kind of Tujia clothing that can statisfy their respective expectations of what counts as authentic. What the local government and institutions are doing is to take deliberate moves to combine the frameworks of semiotic representation given at the global level and the nation-state level, and use these as a sociolinguistic niche and opportunity for embarking on an identity project. In this project they create something that may not necessarily possess intrinsic authenticity, but can still be recognized as legitimate and appropriate nationally and globally, in exchange for potential economic development and political purchase, thus, social mobility. In this sense, their semiotic design is a tactic of authentication through which they symbolically take advantage of and transform the existing orders of authenticity for their own identity making as a group. It, therefore, produces inauthentic authenticity.

## 5 Inauthentic authenticity as an identity strategy

This paper draws on Kress's social-semiotic theory of design for analyzing the semiotic processes of authenticity in Enshi as a margin of China's globalization. The two cases from Enshi, one of Internet hip-hop subculture and one of ethnic heritage tourism, illustrate that globalization can offer the margins specific sociolinguistic niches as semiotic opportunities in which semiotic design is a useful device for articulating and formulating authenticity from the perspective of the margins. This device, as we have seen, works on two different levels. For the Internet rapper, it is particularly useful for him to organize semiotic resources at a micro-linguistic level so that he can take advantage of the global hip-hop culture as a new genre to express himself while sabotaging and subverting dominant ideas of authenticity, and use the semiotic resources in his repertoire effectively for this purpose. In the case of ethnic heritage tourism, semiotic design is seen as an identity maneuver at a macro-institutional level. It hinges on China's politics of multiculturalism as well as Enshi's local history of ethnic identification and authentication. It is through these two crucial aspects that we see semiotic design as a discursively contrived tactic of transforming power relations. Here the product is not seen as important as the socio-political processes that underpin and motivate the idea and the act of design. Together these two cases demonstrate that semiotic practices are materially observable, but more importantly, they are socially and symbolically invested, and susceptiable to power dynamics. Their use is never random or pointless, but always shaped by their users in relation to the social environment. It is therefore the human agency that we need to pay attention to in order to see how semiotics is actually used and transformed for identity making in a globalizing world.

The two examples from Enshi also offer important insights into our understanding of authenticity. It is clear from the examples that authenticity is far from being a mattter of good or bad, true or false, existing or invented. It is an ongoing project in which we are perpetually engaged in the activity of design, of seeking multiple

meanings of authenticity behind every and each sign-making because our conditions of communication are becoming increasingly multi-scalar and polycentric in the context of globalization. Authenticity, therefore, needs to be seen as something that is much layered, fragmented, hybridized and multifocal, something that is politically driven and always involves transgression, innovation and transformation in which our pursuit for authenticity becomes 'a profound and methodical investigation of how to understand ourselves, our histories and how the boundaries of thought may be traversed' (Pennycook 2007a: 42), in order to create new possibilities of becoming. Such features render the term itself a paradox, as its very substance is made of reordering and change of authenticity, thus, inauthenticity – which, as Kress (2010) has rightly pointed out, is a social action in anticipation for effect in the future. This 'inauthentic authenticity', for sure a misnomer, captures the very essence of our quest for authentic identities in a globalizing world rather than the corruption and collapse of authenticity. In this sense, the semiotic design of inauthentic authenticity is both a feature and a strategy of individual as well as group identity making that strives for voice and mobility through social and symbolic maneuvering, particularly so for those in the margins of globalization, as we have seen in the two examples from Enshi.

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